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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended to assist groups of special educators to plan, design, and implement mutual professional support activities. The first section, on the nature of professional support groups, presents a definition and discussion of activity focus, format, permanence of focus, and structure. The second section looks specifically at the role of the local chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children and explains five steps in initially planning and establishing support activities. In the third section, seven steps to assist the group in structuring, managing, and maintaining themselves are offered. Illustrative activities for each of four focus areas (immediate assistance, professional discussions, joint planning and design, and peer observation and feedback) are suggested in the fourth section. Five appendices include: professional support group activity sheets; lists of model and skill development resources; 14 tips to help special educators deal with stress; lists of collaboration resources; and worksheets for observation and feedback. (Nine references) (DB)

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Professional Action Series

Support Groups for Practicing Special Education Professionals

Lynne Cook

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

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Professional Action Series

Support Groups for Practicing Special Education Professionals

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Director, National Clearinghouse for
Professions in Special Education

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Introduction

There are many reasons why special educators join professional groups. At the top of most lists is the opportunity to interact with and learn from like-minded colleagues. Members of these professional groups look beyond their personal circle of friends and trusted colleagues, to the wider arena of professionals who can offer new and diverse ways of enhancing teaching and learning. They look for professional support in a much broader sense.

Given that many special educators work in isolation from other special educators, professional support is not always easily obtainable within the confines of the school structure. The demands and logistics of teaching make it difficult for teachers to form and maintain professional support networks as part of their working day. Too often, opportunities for giving and receiving professional support are either unavailable or offered in a haphazard, "hit-or-miss" fashion—a supervisor drops in on the way to another meeting; a teacher happens upon another teacher in the media center. How can professional support of an enduring nature be made more available to practicing special educators?

This guide was developed on the premise that specific efforts must be undertaken to create formal opportunities for professional support among special educators. The approach taken in this guide is not intended to undermine the importance of forming informal friendships and other collegial relationships, but rather to highlight how professional groups can extend their resources to support the diverse needs of practicing special educators. The purpose of this guide is to assist professional groups, such as CEC Chapters, plan, design, and implement activities through which they can provide their members and colleagues with **professional support**.

This effort to develop professional support groups is being undertaken as a strategy for promoting the retention of qualified professionals. The guide is based on several assumptions:

- Major efforts must be undertaken to retain qualified professionals in special education and related services if we are to reduce the critical shortages of such professionals practicing in the field.

- Professional support at the local level is key to retaining dedicated and talented professionals in the field.

- Collegiality and peer support are powerful strategies for maintaining and enhancing the knowledge and skills of practicing professionals.

- Services to children can be positively affected when practicing professionals experience collegiality and support.

Support for these assumptions comes from professional literature and research which shows that limited opportunities for professional exchange and lack of professional support are two of the most frequently cited reasons for why teachers leave teaching (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Darling-Hammond, 1984; Lawrenson & McKinnon, 1982). Developing professional support opportunities is one step we can begin to take to retain our best and brightest professionals.

This guide provides you with a basic approach for initiating professional support activities at the local level. Working through the guide you will be able to review options and select support opportunities that you wish to undertake, as well as specific strategies for getting started.

Support Groups for Practicing Special Education Professionals has been field tested by CEC Chapters as part of CEC's Recruitment and Retention Campaign. The examples, suggestions, and activities in this guide often focus on local chapter establishment of support groups for special education teachers. These strategies are not exclusive and can easily be expanded for use by other professional groups and for professionals in roles other than teaching.

Professional Support Groups: What Are They?

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS IN PRACTICE

Do any of these following concerns sound familiar?

- Lack of support/cooperation from central office administrators.
- Lack of support/cooperation from building principals.
- Lack of cooperation regarding mainstreaming.
- Conflicts with parents.
- Lack of understanding/appreciation for work from others.
- Disagreement with special education policies/practices.
- Lack of interaction with other professionals and isolation.
- Disagreement with standard school procedures.
- Lack of time.

Each of these statements reflect real issues that teachers face daily and which, when unresolved, contribute to a sense of personal isolation (Billingsley & Cross, 1991). There is widespread acceptance of the need for and value of professional support as a means of improving job satisfaction and hopefully improving personnel retention.

Before embarking on your task of developing a professional support opportunity, it is helpful to gain a clear understanding of the many features of support groups. Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the definition and different aspects of support groups.

Definition

For the purposes of this guide, **professional support groups consist of two or more professionals serving as resources for each other and working together to promote each other's professional performance and growth.** There may be wide variations in the objectives, structure, focus, and nature of the activities of different support groups. However, all professional support groups share the following key characteristics:

- Members value and enjoy belonging to the group.
- Groups are characterized by support, concern, collegiality, and caring.
- Members share the primary goal of supporting and facilitating each other's professional development.

Focus of Activity

Professional support groups pursue many different kinds of support activities. These activities are defined by a **focus** which is the purpose or vision for the activity.

Based on the findings of studies of teacher stress and the benefits of collegiality we recommend that the **focus** of activities undertaken by professional support groups address one or more of the following areas:

- *Providing immediate assistance.* Access to immediate information, advice, or emotional support is an important element of professional support groups. Teachers require immediate response when they encounter unexpected or crisis situations; experience change that requires information about resources, procedures, or strategies; and need to discuss ways of managing overall stress associated with their role or environment. At these times the availability of another teacher or support person to provide information, suggestions, or emotional support is critical.
- *Fostering professional discussions.* Frequent and concrete discussions of instructional strategies, interventions, and other student-related topics are an important characteristic of effective support groups. Little (1982) has found that through the frequent use of precise, concrete, professional discussions teachers develop a coherent, shared language. This shared language helps build a sense of community and belonging and can be used to describe the complexity of various intervention and instructional issues.
- *Facilitating joint planning and design of curriculum.* Whether the focus is on the instruction of one student or many, members of support groups frequently plan, design, prepare, and evaluate specific intervention strategies and/or curriculum materials together. Joint planning may reduce the burden on individuals to generate strategies and plan for implementation, and it

frequently demonstrates the power of the "two heads are better than one" concept and allows for convenient division of labor.

- *Promoting peer observation and feedback.* The use of reciprocal observation and feedback is an important element in successful professional support groups. In these groups members arrange to observe each other performing their professional duties. Teachers might observe each other teaching, managing a behavior problem, or conferring with a parent. The observations and feedback create shared experiences to which the participants may refer in subsequent discussions. These sessions may also contribute new knowledge or ideas to either member.

Format

There are many options for the **format** of support groups. At a basic level, groups may consist of partners (generally a dyad or triad), teams (small groups with a stable membership), or larger groups. The support group initiative to be developed by your chapter may include any or all of these format options. Consider the two examples below:

Options for Chapters

Full Speed Chapter. The Full Speed Chapter implemented several professional support activities simultaneously to meet the diverse needs and interests of its membership. The chapter established an after-school hotline for any teacher in the county to use to make immediate contact with an experienced, knowledgeable, and emotionally supportive colleague who would try to respond to the teacher's immediate need for resources or support. The chapter also redesigned its meeting schedule and format to ensure that meaningful professional presentations were made monthly and constructive professional discussion periods were structured into each meeting. The third component of their professional support group campaign was a structured peer coaching program that they initiated in cooperation with the local school districts.

Deliberate Chapter. The Deliberate Chapter met three times to examine support activity options, chapter resources, and the interest of chapter members. Following their deliberations, they initiated a combination of individually designed partner activities with monthly chapter meetings devoted to monitoring and troubleshooting with the participating pairs or partners and large group discussion of the emerging support and professional development needs of the members. The Deliberate Chapter decided to experiment with and evaluate individually designed partner groups before deciding on a firm direction for the chapter to pursue the following year.

Permanence of Focus

Professional support groups also vary in terms of the **permanence** of their focus. A support group of any format (partners, team, large group) may be established to focus on any or several types of activities for varying time periods. For example, a support activity may be established as a temporary, short-term, or long-term effort by a dyad, team, or large group.

Examples of temporary formats include hot lines, case conferences, large group discussions, and "make-and-take" workshops. Short-term formats are exemplified by peer problem-solving dyads, study groups, and lecture series. Finally, long-term formats include peer coaching and coteaching arrangements, curriculum renewal teams, and district-wide training initiatives.

Structure

The final aspect that varies among professional support groups is the degree of **structure** or flexibility they entail. The extent of structure evident in their scheduling, topic selection, membership, and procedures helps to differentiate different types of groups. Consider the following:

- *Scheduling Flexibility*. Is the schedule of meetings predetermined or is it set as the need arises?
- *Membership*. Are meetings open with varying membership or is the membership static?
- *Topic Selection*. Is the topic predetermined, restricted to a predetermined area, or selected based on the immediate interests of the participants?
- *Procedural*. Can the group's operational procedures be adapted to the particular situation or are they predetermined for use in all eventualities?
- *Leadership*. Is group leadership formal or informal, appointed or emergent, fixed or flexible?
- *Norms*. Are group norms, either spoken or unspoken, understood by the membership? (i.e., punctuality, dress, breaks, refreshments, etc.)

The Chapter's Role in Establishing Professional Support Groups

While much professional support may be derived from interactions with particular individuals on a day-to-day basis, professional support efforts are enhanced when they are undertaken by a group and when members of the group identify the establishment and maintenance of professional support activities as a mutual goal. This is where your CEC chapter can come in. The purpose of this section is to provide you with several strategies that can be used by your chapter to initiate and sustain professional support efforts in your local area. These efforts will undoubtedly involve chapter members but may well extend beyond CEC members.

Promoting professional support efforts means that your chapter will have a coordination and leadership role in selecting, designing, and facilitating the kinds of supportive peer relationships that assist in efforts to retain qualified personnel in the profession. But most important, you will also derive the rewards of participating in a support network for individuals who are at critical stages of their career development in a special education profession.

Use this guide to help you plan and get started. The activities and procedures contained in this guide can be used as they are presented or modified to better meet your individual needs. Don't hesitate to expand on what is presented here, or to substitute other ideas that you have found successful in the past.

Initiating support group efforts in your local area will take some initial planning and organization. But once you've put a few structural mechanisms in place, you should find that the activities require minimum effort to conduct and that you will reap benefits that outweigh the effort. Some basic steps your chapter can follow in getting your support activities established and operating are:

1. Establish a planning or leadership team.

2. Publicly advocate for the use of professional support groups.

3. Determine goals and clarify intent.

4. Identify stakeholders and build relationships.

5. Recruit and select appropriate teachers to participate in the professional support group.

Following is a full description of each of these steps.

ESTABLISH A PLANNING OR LEADERSHIP TEAM

If your professional support group is to be implemented with all chapter members, with chapter members and their nonmember colleagues, or otherwise stands to affect many people, forming a planning or leadership team is the first activity. Team membership that includes a representative group of stakeholders can ensure that diverse perspectives are considered and the program has a broad base of support. The optimal size of such a team is relatively small (5-12 people) with team member selection based on who is most likely to be affected by the project (hence, both CEC members and nonmembers are likely to be involved). In constructing a team you may want to include teachers from all special education environments and grade levels, other special service providers, and possibly an administrator. A mix of veteran teachers, new teachers, different ethnic groups, and men and women may contribute to successful team composition. Of course, the team should be composed of those who have the needed knowledge and skills, commitment to follow through, and willingness to work cooperatively.

When you first convene the group it is a good idea to have group members share why they belong to a formal group in special education (e.g., CEC) and what kinds of support they've experienced by belonging to and participating in such a group. Ask them to recount instances where colleagues helped them make decisions, solve problems, or simply develop strategies to cope with another day. Also share with the group information found in the introduction of this guide. For instance, discuss how it is crucial that all special education professionals take a leadership role in supporting and encouraging the continuing professional development and practice of their colleagues.

PUBLICLY ADVOCATE FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS

Establishing professional support groups aimed at improving teachers' professional skills and satisfaction starts with advocacy on the part of your chapter leadership. By reading this guide and considering developing support activities your chapter has already made a commitment and demonstrated its advocacy for this type of activity. But now your advocacy must become public and highly visible. Now the leadership team needs to make frequent and concrete public announcements of its advocacy for professional support activities. This should be seen as an important commitment and may be appropriate for frequent newsletter articles, announcements in the federation newsletter, and a news release to the local newspaper or to a local educational newsletter.

Continued advocacy for these support groups is important and should become a regular part of chapter and federation events. Participants should be publicly praised in a way that conveys, "It is appropriate and important for teachers to support each others' professional development efforts and all special educators should strive to do so." Throughout the year continue the public advocacy and recognition of the participants. Be sensitive and accepting of initial failures or "false starts" on the part of those who initiate support group activities. It is important that the leadership team demonstrate continued advocacy and encouragement. If participants perceive neglect or a lack of concern on the part of the leadership they may lose interest and let their efforts lapse. When interest wanes or chapter activity seems to falter, corrective action may be as simple as offering assistance or telephoning to offer support or advice. More often than not, however, when initial efforts at establishing support groups waivers, assertive and supportive leadership skills are needed. This is where chapter leadership becomes indispensable. Stepping in long enough to redirect, motivate, and praise chapter members is a critical skill—just as critical as the skill of gently withdrawing that leadership when the chapter is ready to function on its own.

DETERMINE GOALS AND CLARIFY INTENT

Once you have decided to undertake development of a support group, fundamental questions are, "What do we want to see happen?" "What types of activities do we want to pursue?" "What outcomes would be acceptable?" It is at this stage that the initiating group will begin to explore the range of activities that might be the focus of their support groups. Your desired outcomes will guide you in selecting and evaluating potential activities. Planning groups should examine the types of activities described in the opening section of this guide, Professional Support Groups: What Are They?, along with other activities you generate yourselves. It will be helpful to keep the following questions in mind:

- Is this activity likely to result in desirable outcomes?
- How much time commitment does the activity require of the members of the group?
- What resources are needed to implement the activity?
- What resources will be needed to evaluate the activity?
- What resources will be required to maintain the activity?

IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Many people beyond the initial participants in your professional support group will also be interested in your activities. We refer to this broader group of people as **stakeholders**. They include all individuals or groups who may be affected by the development of the support group and should therefore be informed of your plans.

In addition to those who will participate in the support group, stakeholders will probably include other special educators, general educators, at least one administrator, and in some circumstances, students and their parents. Having a picture of what you want the group to accomplish will help you to identify the key stakeholders. You may find these questions helpful for identifying stakeholders:

- Whom are we going to involve directly?
- Who will be influenced by the group and its activities?
- Who is likely to want to be informed about the group and its progress?

As you begin planning and identifying stakeholders you will accomplish another purpose, that of building a base of relationships. You make contacts, build support, and may even uncover potential opposition for your program. Your goal should be to assess and solicit support from your chapter or federation and from all other levels of stakeholders.

RECRUIT AND SELECT TEACHERS

Many ways exist to recruit and select teachers to participate in professional support groups. Regardless of how you approach the recruitment process there are some key considerations about the kind of participants you are seeking. As you plan to initiate support groups you should look for the kinds of participants who are most likely to contribute to the successful and rewarding operation of the group. Look for members who are cooperative, have a positive attitude, and are open and supportive. Negative, untrusting, and critical people can cause your support efforts to fail. You should also seek professionally competent teachers and avoid those who are experiencing serious difficulties in their teaching. Weak or incompetent teachers are likely to need much more intensive interventions than can be provided by an informal professional support group and their professional needs may be so great that they would interfere with the success of the group.

In recruiting and selecting members you may want to:

- Recruit teachers who are already friends or informally support each other.
- Bring many teachers together for several low-risk professional discussions and listen in on their conversations to discover who may be interested in learning new skills with and from others.
- Bring teachers together who teach students of the same age levels or who teach students with similar disabilities.
- Recruit teachers who live in reasonable proximity to each other.
- Identify teachers who have similar learning needs or interests.

After these individuals are identified, you will want to ensure that you and they reach a shared understanding of the support group intent. For example, if you are proposing to implement a peer coaching activity involving two teachers, the principal and the two teachers all need the same definition of what peer coaching involves. The principal could assume that the two teachers are observing and consulting with each other during their planning periods and that their observations will assist in teacher evaluation. One teacher may think the arrangements will result in an additional planning or "collaboration" period to allow for joint problem solving between the peers. The second teacher may envision a structured professional development program through which the peers develop new skills and learn to give and receive corrective feedback regarding their use of the skills. Since these are three valid but different interpretations with very different implications for the participants, it is important to clarify the specific meanings for everyone involved.

Another reason for developing shared meanings is to ensure a common understanding of resource needs. In the example just presented, if the first teacher's notion of peer coaching is correct, the two peers will probably need to identify additional observation time. If the second teacher's version of the relationship is agreed upon, they may need to locate and enroll in a formal professional development training program. And both teachers will want to advise the principal that their coaching will be confidential and unrelated to their evaluations.

Getting Professional Support Groups Started

Once you have planned and provided leadership for the establishment of a professional support group you will need to guide the group through the following steps in structuring, managing, and maintaining themselves:

1. Review, modify, or confirm the proposed goals and nature of the professional support group.

2. Stress the importance of shared goals among members of professional support groups.

3. Conduct individual and group self-assessments.

4. Select support activities consistent with the group's purpose and stage of development.

5. Negotiate shared responsibilities.

6. Structure the first few meetings until the professional support group develops its own structure.

7. Establish a procedure for regularly examining and discussing the support group's functioning and ability to maintain good relationships.

REVIEW, MODIFY, OR CONFIRM GOALS

When first convening a professional support group, review the goals and nature of such groups and their various formats and activities. The members of the professional support group should then modify or confirm the goals, formats, and activities selected by the planning team.

They can accomplish these initial tasks by repeating several of the steps followed by the planning team to determine goals and clarify intent, or a member of the planning

team can describe how the team progressed through the goal/intent clarification process.

Confirming or modifying goals is similar to the earlier step of clarifying intent but it is much more in-depth. It requires looking carefully at the support group, whom it affects, and how they are affected. For example, consider the support group activity described below that a small chapter proposes to implement with its members and an equal number of nonmembers.

A Rural Chapter

A small chapter in a somewhat rural area has a total of 20 members who are employed in one of six small school districts in the area. The 20 members represent only about 25% of all the special education teachers in the six districts. Many of the other teachers in the district are newer to the profession and teaching "out of the field," some have had no special education preparation at all.

The chapter has an evening or Saturday meeting every 2 months in a central location so that no one has to travel more than 100 miles to attend. The meetings frequently focus on planning for state and regional conferences, discussing ways of getting a speaker to address their group, and supporting the Special Olympics. Often as much as half of the meeting time is spent on describing members' professional situations and challenges, sharing suggestions informally, and discussing common problems. But since this is not the agenda topic, someone invariably brings the meeting and discussion back to the task at hand.

Recently, the attendance at meetings has declined and membership has not increased as new teachers have been hired in the districts. Members complain that they are facing greater demands in their roles as special educators and have many more building-level responsibilities. They want to participate in chapter meetings but they say they just don't have the time for more responsibilities like conference or program planning or helping to support Special Olympics.

In a focused group discussion they clarified the needs they were experiencing, the effect these needs are having on themselves and others, and their goals for establishing a professional support network through the use of joint problem solving.

They decided that the informal discussion and assistance that characterizes their meetings was a main source of satisfaction, but the other chapter activities were adding additional responsibilities to their

already overloaded schedules. Moreover, the long travel distances and evening meetings created additional barriers.

Solution One. Through this analysis they decided to initiate smaller group interactions in dyads or small groups that would meet more frequently in their local areas. The dyads would be part of an overall network built around joint problem-solving activities. Each of the members would identify and include a nonmember, special educator in the local activities.

Solution Two. This analysis led the group to set up a computer network using electronic mail and a bulletin board format. They continued to meet monthly for dinner meetings, but at least twice weekly they each checked their electronic mail and responded to questions or problems the others had posted. Each teacher was free to post questions or problem statements on a daily basis and others responded at least twice weekly.

Goal setting should derive from the assessment of needs. One of the most important questions to ask at this point is, "What are our outcome goals?" At first glance this question may seem too basic for consideration, but it is essential. A program emphasizing intervention assistance to special education teachers and related professionals, for example, may have as an outcome goal an overall increase in special education professionals' skills for handling students with learning and behavior problems or improved coordination of services for all special education students in a school setting. In a project that focuses on interpersonal collaboration among professionals for purposes other than making decisions about individual students (e.g., curriculum development team, peer coaching, teaching team), the goals may include improved morale, increased skills, or other elements that contribute to teacher empowerment. The overriding goal, of course, should be to meet each others' professional support needs and to assist oneself and others in continuing to grow and further develop as satisfied special education professionals.

EMPHASIZE SHARED GOALS

Although the first step of getting the group started began with establishing and confirming group goals, it is a good idea to make special efforts to emphasize the mutuality or goal interdependence that unites the professional support group. Members need to realize that the success of the professional support group depends on their working together to help each other reach their shared goal of professional growth and satisfaction. Because of their interdependence, individuals' goals can only be met when the group's goal is met.

CONDUCT SELF-ASSESSMENTS

Assessing individual and group interests, skill levels, and perceived needs is an important next step. In addition to surveying the internal resources of the group, a self-assessment should aim at identifying both the type of relationship members prefer and the level of commitment they are willing to accept. Two worksheets that can structure such self-assessments are included in Appendix A (Activity Sheets 1 and 2).

SELECT SUPPORT ACTIVITIES APPROPRIATE FOR THE GROUP

The review and confirmation of goals completed in the first step provide a solid framework to use in selecting specific activities to pursue in your chapter's professional support group. But there is another highly significant consideration—the level of development of the group and its readiness for different types of interactions and relationships.

Some of the most powerful collegial support activities can occur only after the support group members have gotten to know each other, recognized the resources they have to offer each other, and begun to establish themselves as a group. We recommend distinguishing at least two levels of activities:

- *Level One*. Those informal, introductory level activities that might be used in initial group development or in groups that wish to remain highly flexible and unstructured. These are the kinds of activities illustrated in this guide.

- *Level Two*. Those activities that require notable commitment, greater group cohesion, and a certain level of trust and openness among members. These activities may involve significant and long-term time commitments and require specific skill training in order to implement. Examples include formal peer coaching, mentoring, and collaborative problem-solving strategies. While chapters may be able to implement such activities on their own, they require knowledge and skills beyond anything provided in this guide. Chapters should carefully assess the skill requirements of the activities they select and be certain that they have or can acquire the skills needed. Resources for learning about these more in-depth efforts are listed in Appendix B.

NEGOTIATE SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

Once the group has selected the support activities it will pursue, members should negotiate precisely which responsibilities each member will accept. Group cohesion is enhanced when members agree to mutual responsibilities, but analyze the responsibilities to ensure that members fully understand and are comfortable with the commitments they are making. The kinds of responsibilities groups should consider and possibly accept are listed here and can also be found in the negotiation activity sheet (Activity Sheet 3) in Appendix A.

After completing these negotiations, some groups find it useful to develop a contract listing the responsibilities each group member mutually agree to accept. This

contract can then serve as a basis for subsequent discussions of how well the professional support group is functioning. A sample contract (Activity Sheet 4) is also provided in Appendix A. If your group wishes to develop a contract, this model can be modified to meet the agreements you make.

STRUCTURE THE FIRST FEW MEETINGS

The activities of the professional support group are aimed at helping all members master, refine, and adapt their professional skills. Discussing their performance, jointly planning lessons, jointly designing curriculum materials, and reciprocally observing each other's performance are the major activities. As the group develops and monitors its own performance, members will be able to structure meeting agendas to suit their own needs. Initially, however, it may be advantageous to use preplanned agendas designed to ensure that all of the "getting started" steps are covered. A suggested meeting agenda, included in Appendix A, has been designed to address many of the important steps detailed in this section.

MONITOR THE GROUP'S FUNCTIONING

If the professional support group is to be effective, members must monitor the group's functioning and regularly examine their collective ability to maintain good relationships within the group. The responsibilities that group members negotiated earlier should be reviewed periodically and discussed within the group as a means of ensuring that the group attends to its own maintenance. When groups encounter difficulties in functioning and maintaining supportive relationships among members, they should consider ways of enhancing their group participation skills. Relevant materials, workshops, and other training resources may be used to help members develop stronger group-process skills. Several of these resources are listed in Appendix B.

As you initiate support groups, careful attention to these seven steps should get the group off to a good start. There is no one single model—no prescription for the perfect support group design. Effective professional support groups are designed to meet the individual and collective needs of their members. The precise size, format, or focus of effective support groups will vary. The guidelines and sample activities presented in this manual, and the other resources provided in the appendices should assist you in developing the kind of support group that best serves the needs of your chapter and its professional support agenda.

Suggested Professional Support Group Activities

Earlier, we identified areas of focus for professional support group activities as (1) providing immediate assistance, (2) fostering professional discussions, (3) facilitating joint instructional planning and curriculum design, and (4) promoting peer observation and feedback. Each focus area is discussed in this section and illustrative activities are described.

IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE

Access to immediate information, advice, or emotional support is an important element of professional support groups. Teachers require an immediate response when they encounter unexpected or crisis situations; experience change that requires information about resources, procedures, or strategies; or need to discuss ways of managing overall stress associated with their role or environment. At these times the availability of another teacher or support person to provide information, suggestions, or emotional support is critical.

Some suggested activities through which chapters can provide immediate assistance and support include:

- Using a mechanism like Activity Sheet 1 (Appendix A), create a directory of chapter members and their self-identified resources or areas of strength. When teachers feel a need for immediate support, information, or advice, they will be able to identify a colleague likely to have skills or information helpful to them. Any member of the support group can call any other member listed in the resource directory since they all made a mutual commitment to respond to needs and facilitate the professional development of their peers.

- In a large district with three or four special educators in each building, teachers may stagger their planning periods so that one is always available to assist another in the classroom, fill in for a few minutes, or otherwise respond to a colleague's request for support.

- Establish a hotline that operates daily after school hours. Members can take turns "staffing" the hotline, and the use of call forwarding services allows for flexible scheduling. Regular meetings might be held for the hotline volunteers to discuss strategies for responding to teachers' support needs. In these meetings they may share information about the kinds of problems they encountered on the phone and use this information to identify common professional development needs of the frequent callers. This information can serve as a needs assessment for planning professional programs for chapter meetings.

PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSIONS

Frequent and concrete discussions of instructional strategies, interventions, and other student-related topics are an important characteristic of effective support groups. By frequently engaging in precise, concrete professional discussions, teachers develop a coherent, shared language. This shared language helps build a sense of community and belonging and can be used to describe the complexity of various intervention and instructional issues.

Professional support groups can promote these kinds of professional discussions through a large number of activities. Several suggestions are listed below:

- Plan a series of meetings with designated speakers presenting information on a topic of interest to most group members. Following the presentations, create small discussion groups for structured discussions of what was presented.

- Strategies for managing teachers' stress is a topic that doesn't directly address instructional improvement or other professional development issues but should not be overlooked. Most of the strategies and activities presented in this guide are designed to increase professional support for teachers as a means of increasing their professional satisfaction and performance. It is equally important to help teachers understand, reduce, and manage the stress that seems to be increasing among special education professionals. A discussion of strategies for handling stress could be structured around the topics detailed in the ERIC Digest, *Fourteen Tips to Help Special Educators Deal with Stress* in Appendix C.

- Plan a discussion at a support group meeting around the items listed in the negotiation activity sheet (Activity Sheet 3) in Appendix A. This is a particularly appropriate topic for an early organizational meeting when members are getting to know each other and learning about the individual assets and preferences that will help to shape the development of the group.

- If you are in a chapter that covers a geographical area too large for members to meet regularly, consider the possibility of making arrangements to use teleconferencing equipment that may be available through a county or state

education agency or through a university system. If possible you could hold teleconferences on selected topics with other members of the support group. In order to derive maximum benefit from the teleconferencing format, you may have to obtain some technical assistance and advice from a technology coordinator on how to structure the conferences.

- Convene a group of teachers to participate in "teacher clinics." These use mini-case-study formats in which a different teacher is designated to present a case analysis to the group at each session. Following the presentation all group members discuss the case and may engage in joint problem solving to develop new ideas for intervention strategies.

- Follow a Journal Club format in which group members take turns presenting current "cutting-edge" professional journal articles and leading a discussion on how the information can be adapted for use in day-to-day teaching activities.

JOINT PLANNING AND DESIGN

Whether the focus is on the instruction of one student or many, members of support groups frequently plan, design, prepare, and evaluate specific intervention strategies and/or curriculum materials together. Joint planning may reduce the burden on individuals to generate strategies and plan for implementation. It frequently demonstrates the power of the "two heads are better than one" concept and allows for convenient division of labor.

- Organize a group of teachers who teach at the same age level or in the same area of exceptionality (e.g., elementary teachers of students with learning disabilities; secondary transition specialists). Work with this group to plan adaptations to the district-adopted curriculum guide. In doing so members will interact regularly to evaluate the district's curriculum, the needs of their students, and successful intervention strategies. Because they are working on a project with direct implications for their own teaching as well as district-wide implications, there is a real necessity for them to reach consensus on their decisions.

- Teachers may meet to jointly develop supplemental materials for reinforcing the concepts presented in a newly adopted instructional text series. Their joint efforts at materials development may lead to efficient divisions of labor and their comraderie may improve job satisfaction.

- Teachers with similar interests or assignments may decide to plan lessons and/or interventions together, implement them with their own students, and then discuss the results with their partner(s) or group members. The Coplanning Worksheet in Appendix D may be useful for this activity.

- Develop a series of partnerships or peer buddy relationships for the purpose of collaborative problem solving. Group members should read and discuss the Pugach and Johnson (1988) peer collaboration strategy in Appendix D and then determine the procedures they will use in their collaborative problem solving with peers. As with many of the most powerful support activities, this one requires particular skills. Specifically, it requires that the partners have collaborative problem-solving skills if they are to be successful. Members may wish to review the problem-solving summary developed by Friend and Cook (1992) and included in Appendix D or examine related resources for developing problem solving skills (Appendix B). When group members have the necessary skills, they can initiate a project in which partners meet regularly to assist each other through peer collaboration.

- Teachers from "feeder" schools may work with teachers from the "receiver" school to plan a program for students who are transitioning across levels of schooling. In the process of designing the program, teachers should examine their assumptions about desired outcomes for students and jointly redesign the continuum of skills that define the relevant portions of the curriculum in special education.

PEER OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

The use of reciprocal observation and feedback is an important element in successful professional support groups. In these groups members arrange to observe each other performing their professional duties. Teachers might observe each other teaching, managing a behavior problem, or conferring with a parent. The observations and feedback create shared experiences to which the participants may refer in subsequent discussions. These sessions may also contribute new knowledge or ideas to either member.

- After holding several meetings for professional discussions of a particular instructional approach or strategy, identify those members who wish to pursue the topic in greater depth. With these teachers you can form a focused support group. The first few sessions of the support group should be devoted to establishing the group, the mutual goals that bind it, and members' mutual responsibilities. Members should agree that reciprocal peer observations and feedback will be an integral part of their activity. They should select peer "buddies" and arrange for each pair to conduct a certain number of reciprocal observations within a given time period. The peer observation worksheet in Appendix E may help to structure this. They may also wish to continue to meet as a small group to discuss, jointly problem solve, and design classroom management procedures.

- If you have administrative support for reciprocal observations and can secure administrative cooperation in providing the group's members with some scheduling flexibility, you will find it relatively easy to schedule partner observations. If long or incompatible distances make the scheduling of peer

observation and feedback sessions impractical, you will have to creatively find alternatives to in-class observations. One such alternative has been developed and used successfully for several years by the Department of Special Education at California State University, Northridge (Cavallaro, 1987). In their adaptation, teachers make a videotape illustrating some aspect of their professional performance (e.g., instruction, assessment, consultation). Each member critiques his or her own tape and selects a 10-15 minute segment to playback in a subsequent meeting with support group peers who provide feedback on the observation. An alternative strategy is to share tapes only with one peer rather than with a full group. The group approach is preferred, however, because it reduces the number of videotapes each person needs to produce and it expands the feedback they receive.

- Establish a process by which group members identify the performance areas where they need feedback so that their partners' observations can focus on appropriate targets.

- Ensure that group members have effective skills for providing each other with feedback. If this step is overlooked, some teachers will complain that they are not learning anything from the feedback while others may report feeling self-conscious and criticized. If group members need to improve their feedback skills, you may wish to review the summary and exercises in Appendix E or identify materials from the resource list in Appendix B to develop and practice the skills of constructive feedback.

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Appendix A

Professional Support Groups
Activity Sheets

ACTIVITY SHEET 1:
SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR ENTERING A PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT GROUP

1. What do you want to learn to do better?

   Select an area of your professional performance or responsibility in which you feel a need for skill improvement. Be specific and give illustrations if possible.

   Describe the specific need(s) (e.g., managing a disruptive student's behavior or maintaining a learning atmosphere for the class when the student acts out) rather than general categories (e.g., behavior management).

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2. How do you think you could best develop your skills in this area?
   1 = least likely to be helpful; 3 = most likely to be helpful

   1 2 3 Attending 2 or 3 lectures.
   1 2 3 Attending 2 or 3 lectures and participating in discussions.
   1 2 3 Taking a class.
   1 2 3 Observing someone else demonstrate the skill.
   1 2 3 Learning about the skill from discussions with colleagues.
   1 2 3 Having someone work with you in your classroom and give you feedback on your performance.
   1 2 3 Having someone you could call upon for suggestions and advice as the need arises.

3. List other teachers or support personnel you think could help you develop or improve the skill you desire.

   _____
   _____
   _____

4. Do you prefer to work with one or two others, with small groups, or with large groups?

   _____
   _____

5. What is most appealing and least appealing about having another teacher observe you or work with you in your classroom?

   _____
   _____
   _____

6. Now that you have identified your skill development needs and considered ways you might be able to meet them, decide on an approach(es) you believe could be developed in a professional support group that you would find useful. In other words, describe your "ideal" vision of how you could develop these skills with others in the chapter.

   _____
   _____
   _____

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_____

ACTIVITY SHEET 2:
SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR SELECTING A PARTNER

1. Name an instructionally related area(s) in which you wish to improve your skills.

   _____

2. Identify an instructionally related area(s) in which you have particular strengths or have something to offer others.

   _____

3. Select another teacher who has skills or has interest in developing new skills in the area(s) you identified in item 1. This teacher should be someone you believe you can work with and someone who you think will be supportive.

   _____

4. Develop a list of the descriptors you would like to characterize your relationship. (Some possible descriptors might be: confidential, accessible, honest, kind, direct, casual, trusting, flexible, structured.)

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

5. Develop a list of the types of activities you would like to pursue with the teacher you selected in item 3. You may want to rank items as to whether you are ready to engage in the activity now or whether it is one you might want to pursue after you've developed a working relationship.

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

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ACTIVITY SHEET 3:
NEGOTIATING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT GROUP MEMBERSHIP

When teachers become part of a professional support group they accept certain mutual responsibilities. As you initiate a professional support group it is very important for *all* members to understand the expectations and responsibilities for membership. Groups should review, discuss, and negotiate each of the following possible responsibilities.

1. To attend the meetings of the professional support group.

2. To commit themselves to promoting their own professional growth.

3. To commit themselves to helping other members promote their professional growth.

4. To discuss their own performance and engage in problem solving to improve their performance and that of other members.

5. To ask other members to observe them periodically as they perform their professional duties and to provide them with feedback.

6. To agree to observe the other members perform their professional duties and to provide them with feedback.

7. To contribute constructively to the goal achievement of the professional support group and to maintain high quality working relationships among members.

These responsibilities may be made into a contract that is eventually formalized and will serve as a basis for discussing how well the professional support group is functioning (see Activity Sheet 4). We encourage you to add additional responsibilities and expectations as needed to meet the goals agreed upon by your support group.

Adapted from: Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed.). p. 7:18. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

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ACTIVITY SHEET 4:
PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT GROUP CONTRACT

Based on group decisions made when negotiating professional group membership, a group contract may be developed and agreed to by the members. The following model may be modified and used for dyads, teams, or large groups of any focus.

We *(type in group name or group member's names here)* agree:

1. To accept the goal of supporting each other's efforts to improve his or her competence in _____

2. To meet at least once monthly to:

   a. Discuss our use of _____
   b. Help each other solve problems and overcome roadblocks in implementing _____
   c. Coplan lessons or programs using _____
   d. Engage in reciprocal observation and processing of each other's use of _____

3. We will meet on _____

4. The place we will meet is _____

   _____

5. The length of our meetings will be _____

6. Our first agenda will be _____

   _____

(Signatures)

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

Adapted from: Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed). p. 7:39. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

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ACTIVITY SHEET 5:
STRUCTURING THE INITIAL MEETINGS—SAMPLE AGENDA

The activities of the professional support group are aimed at helping all members master, refine, and adapt their professional skills. Discussing their performance, jointly planning lessons, jointly designing curriculum materials, and reciprocally observing each other's performance efforts are the major activities of the group.

The "professional support group leader" should schedule the first meeting of the support group and ensure that it covers the following agenda items:

1. Your support of their efforts in implementing professional support group activities.

2. When the regular meeting time will be. The meeting should last at least 50 to 60 minutes. Breakfast clubs, which meet regularly for breakfast before school begins are popular. So are after school and/or happy hour meetings.

3. The purposes of professional support groups. This is an appropriate time to review, modify or confirm goals as discussed above. Stress the importance of shared goals.

4. Plans to make each meeting both productive and fun. With that in mind you might ask who is going to be in charge of the refreshments for the next meeting (a cooperative effort is recommended).

5. Specific plans for:

   a. When the next meeting will be.
   b. What outside activity they may need to complete before the next meeting (e.g., Activity Sheet 1).
   c. What the agenda for the next meeting will be.

Adapted from: Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed.). p. 7:19. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

Note: From *Support Groups for Practicing Special Education Professionals* by Lynne Cook, 1992, Reston, VA: National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education. The Council for Exceptional Children. Reprinted by permission.

Appendix B

Model and Skill Development Resources

MODEL SKILL AND DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

MODEL RESOURCE LIST

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SKILL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE LIST

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Appendix C

Fourteen Tips to Help Special Educators Deal with Stress

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ERIC Digest

DIGEST #E467 1989

FOURTEEN TIPS TO HELP SPECIAL EDUCATORS DEAL WITH STRESS

It cannot be denied; education is a stressful business. In a recent survey done by The Council for Exceptional Children, 60% of the respondents rated work-related stress between 7 and 9 on a 10-point scale. Major causes of stress included too much paperwork, lack of time, attitudes of others, and student behavior. Listed below are 14 tips to help keep stress manageable.

Organize Your Time and Your Activities

1. *Set realistic and flexible professional goals and objectives.* Don't set expectations that will be impossible to meet—that only results in failure, frustration, and guilt. Sharing those inflated expectations with others (e.g., telling regular classroom teachers you can consult with them twice weekly while you are carrying full time direct service responsibilities) creates additional pressure that results in stress. Setting expectations too low, on the other hand, can create lethargy and lack of motivation.

2. *Establish priorities.* Each day there seem to be many jobs which must get done. It is helpful to establish priorities to deal with needs in the order of importance. As one job at a time is successfully tackled, a sense of accomplishment can develop. You may discover that low priority items may not have to be done at all.

3. *Leave your work at school.* One of the major problems educators face is bringing work home after school. This causes problems in that schoolwork never seems to be finished, and it often interferes with personal and family life. One way to break that cycle is to avoid bringing work home. Some educators have found staying at school later in the afternoon may be required. Another alternative is going into school very early in the morning to grade papers, do planning, and set up the classroom. Staying in school until as late as seven or eight o'clock on a Friday evening may allow you to enjoy the remainder of the weekend without having schoolwork hanging over your head. Planning a late dinner on Friday night (candles, wine, and children in bed—all optional) may be very therapeutic.

4. *Pace yourself.* Managing time is certainly a key to dealing with stress. Approaches to help avoid wasting time and prevent procrastination include setting realistic time lines, getting high priority work done early in the day (when we tend to work most efficiently), and including time for yourself in each day. Do not try to do everything at once. If you are a new special educator you should not expect to master every aspect of the profession immediately. Nor should you expect to be able to meet everyone else's needs in terms of consultant services, diagnostic evaluations, and so on, while providing direct service to children. It is necessary to pace yourself, not only each day, but for each week and each year. The social worker or psychologist who wants to revise the entire placement team process or modify the role of special services personnel should expect that goal to take considerable time to fulfill. Small steps to achieving those goals should be identified and cherished.

5. *Use available human resources.* Use the available human resources to their maximum potential. Take the extra time necessary to train an aide or secretary to handle more responsibilities independently. Training students or parent volunteers as classroom aides can result in greatly increased instructional time without increasing your workload.

6. *Organize your classroom.* Improved classroom organization can save time and increase professional productivity. Setting up a catalog system for materials, tests, and instructional techniques can make these resources more accessible to you and to other professionals who have need of them.

   Similarly, developing a general filing system or computerized management system so that diagnostic information, IEPs, student performance data, and curriculum objectives are available can improve classroom efficiency. Organizing the classroom so that students can function independently by preparing work folder learning centers or student contracts may free you to attend more directly to individual student needs. Giving students access to classroom materials such as books, paper, pencils, audiovisual equipment, self correcting materials, and training them in their use can likewise improve the learning environment.

Be Open to Change, Innovation, and New Opportunities

7. *Change your environment.* Changing roles from resource teacher to special class teacher, for example, may reduce stress by allowing you to focus on direct service instead of having to cope with the additional demands of diagnosis and consulting. A school counselor who moves from a high school to a junior high school situation may find the job description at the new school more satisfactory. A simple change in environment from one elementary school to another may give you a new perspective, new friends, different students, and new supervisors.

8. *Keep yourself motivated.* It is important to keep motivated. Seeking out new experiences can be one way to maintain professional interest and prevent stagnation. A special educator can try new instructional techniques, implement alternative programs, or develop new materials. A school psychologist can add a test to his or her test battery or try a new counseling technique. Look for opportunities to share your expertise—Present your project at a CEC federation or national conference; submit your curriculum or research to the ERIC database.

9. *Consider career options.* There are many alternative career avenues that special educators and special services personnel should consider to diversify their experience or stimulate interest. Career options include placement team coordinator, itinerant diagnostician, work study coordinator, consultant, and inservice coordinator. In some districts, educators have the option of taking one of those roles for one year and then return, refreshed, to previous responsibilities. There are also many opportunities for part time jobs or job sharing (two educators share one job—one works two days per week, the other three) which may provide a change of pace for weary professionals.

10. *Seek out personal learning experiences.* Professional and personal growth requires that we keep learning. Certification requirements and school salary schedules encourage educators to take additional coursework. Seek programs of study that are interesting and stimulating as well as appropriate for meeting requirements. Programs that provide new skills needed on the job (i.e., consulting, teaching reading, diagnosis) or that broaden your base of knowledge (a special educator taking courses in psychology or sociology) are ideal. Dropping a course that is irrelevant, poorly taught, or too time consuming may also be very therapeutic. Seeking out personal learning experiences can likewise add productive dimensions to an educator's experience. Taking classes in ceramics, knitting, car maintenance, or home repair, for example, can provide a myriad of benefits. Not only do they develop new skills and interests, but they might even save you money.

Be Positive About Yourself and Your Profession

11. *Allow a "moment of glory."* Too often, schools are not very positive places to be. Students, supervisors, parents, and colleagues do not often tell you what a great job you're doing. It is, therefore, important for special educators and special services personnel to accept and acknowledge positive feedback. When someone does praise you, don't reject it. We are very good at allowing false modesty ("I didn't really do anything special") or embarrassment to rob us of our just rewards. A response like, "Yes, I really worked hard and it's gratifying to see the results; it means a lot to me that you've noticed," will not only allow you your moment of glory but will encourage the person gracious enough to bestow some positive reinforcement on a fellow human being.

12. *Look for the "silver lining."* It is often helpful to seek out the "silver lining" in an otherwise dismal situation. As a consultant to regular classroom teachers, it is not unheard of to walk into a classroom that has received hours of your support only to find calamity prevailing. At that point it is easy to give up in total frustration. A better alternative, however, is to try to find some glimmer of hope in that situation (e.g., "It could have been worse if I hadn't been there; her behavior management techniques were terrible but she was teaching a good lesson.") or to immediately go to another classroom where the teacher has succeeded by implementing your recommendations.

13. *Become directly involved.* In many cases, working directly to deal with the issues that cause problems can be both therapeutic and productive. Become active in your professional association to institute desired changes. Work with CEC's Political Action Network to influence state and federal legislation. Becoming a member of an inservice training advisory board, curriculum committee, or a task force of the local teachers association may allow you to effectively deal with problems causing stress for yourself and your colleagues. On the other hand, resigning from a committee that is causing frustration or is simply wasting your time, can also be therapeutic.

14. *Remember the children you serve.* Remember why you have chosen to be a special education teacher or member of the special services staff. Focus on the personal, professional, and philosophical reasons that give meaning to your working hours. Keeping your thoughts on the handicapped children you serve, your pride in professional accomplishments, and your empathy for those who society often rejects, will help you cope with a narrow minded principal, difficult parents, an inane meeting, or the endless paperwork that passes through your hands.

These ideas are based on suggestions presented in *Stress and Burnout—A Primer for Special Education and Special Services Personnel* by Stan F. Shaw, Jeffrey M. Bensky, and Benjamin Dixon, 1981, 61 pp. A CEC/ERIC Publication, The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091. Stock No. 223. $6.25 (CEC Member Price $5.00) U.S. Funds.

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Appendix D

Collaboration Resources

COPLANNING WORKSHEET

1. I have a partner(s) named _____

2. The time we set for our regular, recurring meetings is _____

3. We have accepted the goal of improving each other's competence in using _____

   _____ Yes _____ No

4. The first lesson we have planned together has been completed.

   _____ Yes _____ No

5. If we are developing materials, we will divide our labors by:

   I will develop _____

   My partner(s) will develop _____

6. The date when each of us will teach the lesson is _____

7. The time set for us to discuss how well the lesson went is _____

8. Our rules for making sure the discussion is productive and interesting are:

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

Adapted from: Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed.). p. 7:37. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

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STEPS IN THE INTERPERSONAL PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS

Deciding Whether to Problem Solve

Before problem solving, ask yourself these questions:

1. Are the persons who have responsibility and resources for addressing the problem committed to resolving it?

2. What might happen if nothing is done to resolve the problem?

3. Does the problem warrant the effort and resources that will be required to accomplish significant change?

4. Are adequate time and resources available to resolve the problem?

If most answers are positive, it is probably worth the time and effort to problem solve systematically. If most answers are no, it might be appropriate to lower expectations, or to work to address the interfering issues prior to problem solving.

Problem Solving Steps

1. *Identify the problem.* Although this seems to be the simplest step in the process, it is actually the most difficult; the key to success is slowing down.

2. *Generate potential solutions.* This step involves using brainstorming and other techniques to create a broad range of possible strategies for addressing the problem.

3. *Evaluate potential solutions.* In this step, two actions are taken. First, the positive and negative aspects for each solution are assessed. As a result some solutions will be eliminated. Second, the tasks that have to be carried out to complete each strategy are outlined. This is a means of checking solution feasibility. At this point, additional potential solutions will be eliminated.

4. *Select the solution.* Based on the options remaining as potential solutions, one is selected based on levels of perceived effectiveness, intrusiveness, or preference.

5. *Implement the solution.* Prior to implementation, detailed planning should occur. Tasks to be addressed include assigning responsibilities, making arrangements as needed, determining criteria for success, and deciding when to evaluate outcomes. After this final planning, implementation occurs.

6. *Evaluate the outcome.* Following a short period of solution implementation, participants should evaluate the process and outcome both informally and formally. They may decide the problem has been resolved or they may make adaptations in the solution. Occasionally, they will decide the solution is not successful. If the latter case, they will need to analyze what has occurred and reenter the problem solving process.

Adapted from: Friend, M., & Cook, L. (1992). *Interactions: Collaborative skills for school professionals*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

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TEN TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERACTIONS

1. Keep in mind that you have a frame of reference that influences your interactions and that others may have frames of reference very different from yours.

2. When another person relates a concern, think about why the person is sharing information. This may help you avoid inappropriate conclusions that he or she wants advice from you.

3. When another person relates a concern, avoid the temptation to trade stories of your own related to the topic.

4. Much miscommunication occurs because of poor listening. You can confirm that you have accurately heard others' messages by paraphrasing the information and asking for confirmation that you have correctly understand it.

5. As much as possible, focus your interactions on information that is observable. The more you rely on opinions and inferences, the more likely is miscommunication.

6. Nonverbal communication is essential for effective interactions. It should convey the same message the speaker is sending verbally.

7. When you interact with others, beware of the impact of statements or questions that guide others' behaviors. Examples include statements that begin with phrases such as, "You should...," "Most people would...," "Have you ever considered...," and "Tell him/her...".

8. When you are asking others to share information, use open questions and ask them one at a time.

9. Evaluative comments generally interfere with effective interactions.

10. Resistance is sometimes an appropriate response to change. If you perceive that others are resistant, remember that insisting on your point of view may create an adversarial situation.

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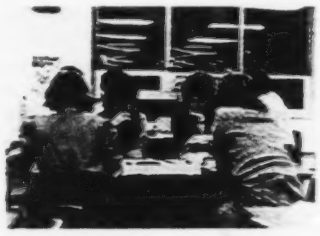
TRAINER'S NOTEBOOK

Peer Collaboration



Marleen Pugach
Lawrence J. Johnson

When classroom teachers encounter students who are experiencing mild learning and behavior problems, they are typically faced with the decision to either initiate a formal referral for special education or develop appropriate modifications within the classroom to ensure student success. Since referral for special education is one of the only ways available to classroom teachers to secure external assistance and resources for students, it often appears to be one of the easiest paths to solving the problem. However, recent research indicates that the current legislated system of referral and identification in special education does not distinguish well between handicapped and nonhandicapped students who are referred (Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983). It also fails to include the referring teacher as an equal partner and underutilizes his or her expertise (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980). Finally, the current special education system diverts resources and time to diagnosis and identification of students rather than placing those resources in instruction (Shepard, 1983).

This body of research suggests that it is essential to develop less formal and more direct methods of assisting classroom teachers to use their expertise in solving mild academic and behavior problems within their own classrooms. Such methods, often called *prereferral interventions*, will be critical if teachers are to achieve success with the wide range of students typically found in general education classrooms while at the same time making more accurate distinctions between students who need to be referred for formal evaluation to special education and those who do not.

One way of enhancing the capabilities of classroom teachers to develop appropriate interventions is to provide them with specific strategies both for analyzing the problems their students are experiencing and for developing and evaluating appropriate and practical interventions. The process described in this article, peer collaboration, is an interactive method of problem solving designed to meet this need. Peer collaboration is based upon the assumption that, given a systematic strategy for solving classroom problems, general education teachers working together can be successful in developing effective instructional and behavioral interventions for their students.

When classroom teachers use peer collaboration, they are paired with other classroom teachers and follow a systematic, highly structured dialogue about the problems they are facing. This dialogue is based on a series of metacognitive strategies that have previously been successful in improving reading comprehension (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and include clarifying issues through self-questioning, summarizing, and predicting, as they relate to a specific instructional or behavioral problem concerning the teacher. In the context of peer collaboration, general education teachers work toward greater comprehension of the problems in their classrooms before attempting to solve them. The problems addressed may involve a single child, a small group of children, or the whole class.

During the dialogue, each teacher in the pair has a specific role to play. The teacher sharing the problem is called the "initiator"; he or she is guided in following each specific step of the dialogue by the peer partner, the "facilitator." The role of the initiator is to solve the problem, while the role of the facilitator is to ensure that the process is being used appropriately as a means of arriving at the solution. In this way, facilitators help their partners restructure the way they go about solving classroom problems. As teachers become skilled in the use of peer collaboration, it is anticipated that they will internalize this particular set of problem-solving strategies. And by working in a paired, interactive, and collegial format, teachers receive guidance and feedback from their peers as each step of the new problem-solving process is rehearsed.

Steps in Peer Collaboration

The four steps that make up the peer collaboration process include (a) problem description and asking clarifying questions; (b) summarizing the problem; (c) developing at least three potential interventions and making predictions about the outcome of each; and (d) developing a practical evaluation strategy. Each step is described in detail below.

1: Problem Description and Clarifying Questions

When a teacher encounters a problem, a meeting with the peer partner is set. At this point, the teacher sharing the problem becomes the initiator and the peer becomes the process facilitator. At the first meeting, the initiator brings a short written description of the problem as a point of departure; the facilitator reads the description and asks whether or not there are any clarifying questions to be asked. Typically such descriptions are no more than one or two sentences in length, for example, "Jim refuses to complete his work—both activities and papers." The initiating teacher then attempts to ask and answer aloud a series of questions designed to clarify any factors that might be contributing to the problem. For example, the initiator might ask and respond to questions

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such as, "When does the behavior occur?" or "What activities is he successful in completing?" This self-questioning technique allows the initiating teacher to practice routinely considering that a wide variety of factors may be relevant to the problem and should be considered.

If the initiator has difficulty generating clarifying questions, the facilitator guides the process by suggesting a number of classroom factors about which questions would seem appropriate. The facilitator uses the format, "Is there a question you could ask yourself about the materials with which he has difficulty?" The purpose of this assistance is not to provide the initiating teacher with a specific question, but rather to suggest a general area that may not have been examined. Questions are generated and answered by the initiator with the facilitator's guidance until the problem has been clarified to enable the initiating teacher to recognize a pattern of behavior and form a summary.

2: Summarizing

Once the problem has been clarified, the initiator summarizes the problem to include (a) the pattern of behavior that has been clarified, (b) the teacher's response to the behavior, and (c) relevant variables in the classroom over which the teacher has control. The summary is intended to identify specific variables that should be considered in developing appropriate interventions. The facilitator guides the peer in making sure the summary includes each of the three parts required by asking for each part in sequence. As a result of the previous step, in which clarifying questions were asked, the summary usually differs in some very specific ways from the initial description. For example, in the case of Jim, the first part of the summary was, "If Jim feels he cannot succeed then he will not attempt the task." The initiating teacher moved from a description of the immediate problem to a summary that reflected an important basis for potential intervention, namely, Jim's projection of success or failure prior to attempting his work. The summary of Jim's case was, "If Jim feels he cannot succeed then he will not attempt the task." This kind of change from descriptions to summaries is typical of teachers who have used peer collaboration; completion of the self-questioning step appears to provide an appropriate structure for teachers to recast their original assessments of student behavior.

3: Interventions and Predictions

In this step, at least three interventions are generated by the initiating teacher, and predictions are made regarding the possible outcomes of each. Interventions must be practical in nature and only minimally disruptive to the teacher and the class. Again, the facilitator's responsibility is to assure that each step is followed. As in the previous step, the facilitator encourages his or her partner to consider multiple interventions and think through the potential of each intervention to solve the problem most effectively. In addition, the facilitator assists the initiating teacher in considering the practicality of the interventions. One intervention strategy is selected for implementation.

4: Evaluation Plan

The final step in the peer collaboration process is the development of a practical plan to evaluate the selected intervention. The evaluation plan is meant to be easy to use and should allow the teacher to keep track of progress in a minimally intrusive way. In the case of Jim, the initiating teacher realized that she could control how tasks were presented in a way that could reduce Jim's apprehension prior to attempting tasks. The intervention chosen involved providing a detailed explanation of each assignment on a one-to-one basis as well as providing Jim with a card identifying each task required. His performance on each task was to be checked daily. At the end of this step, the initiating teacher is ready to implement the intervention plan, and the peers agree to meet again in 2 weeks to assess progress or begin the process again.

Implementation

Once teachers complete their training, a cycle of initial problem solving for one case usually takes from about 45 minutes to an hour to complete. Because peer collaboration is based on the assumption that teachers can be successful problem solvers only when provided with the time and a specific set of strategies for doing so, schools wishing to implement this process must develop ways of organizing and distributing resources to allow teachers to engage in the process on an ongoing basis as part of their regularly scheduled duties. Peer collaboration is designed to be used only when these conditions are met; otherwise, it becomes yet another burden on classroom teachers. Suggestions for time allotments might include (a) floating substitutes on a regular basis (a model often used to allow teachers to participate in multidisciplinary team meetings); (b) coordinating specialist activities (e.g., music, PE, art) so peer pairs can meet; (c) scheduling special education teachers to take over classes regularly, assuming appropriate certification or waivers for this purpose; or (d) scheduling regular classes with principals as substitute instructors.

For the process to succeed, adequate time must be devoted to training. Training in peer collaboration begins with an explanation of its purpose and its basis in metacognitive strategies. This is followed by a brief orientation to the four steps of the process and viewing of a demonstration videotape of each step. Specific guidelines are presented for each step, as well as demonstrations of potentially confusing aspects of the process. Teachers learn to record their interactions in writing, using a specified format in a booklet designed for this purpose. Training sessions are tape-recorded to allow teachers to review their progress. Teachers spend the greatest proportion of their training time on acquiring the skills of self-questioning. It is this step that is most unlike what teachers report they typically do when approaching problems. By discussing in advance the length of time it takes to acquire the skill of self-questioning as compared to the much shorter time needed to learn the three succeeding steps, teachers appear most willing and enthusiastic to engage in the hard work needed to acquire this particular strategy.

Following the orientation, teachers practice each step with their partners

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using a real problem as a basis for developing a viable solution. During training, which typically takes 3 to 4 hours, they learn to take on the roles of both initiator and facilitator under the supervision of a trainer who has used peer collaboration successfully and who provides constant feedback to the pair. In order to learn both roles, each teacher must have the opportunity to be both initiator and facilitator in the training setting.

Benefits

The effectiveness of peer collaboration is currently being investigated in a 3-year research project with sites in Alabama, Illinois, and Wisconsin. Preliminary findings from the first 2 years indicate multiple benefits. Using peer collaboration, teachers are given the opportunity to consider instructional and behavior problems in a more comprehensive manner than occurs under current practice. With this opportunity comes the potential to see a problem more objectively and develop solutions based on clarified understandings.

During the 1986-1987 school year, 48 elementary school teachers—24 pairs—used the peer collaboration process to solve more than 80 problems in their classrooms. These teachers reported that the problems had been resolved to their immediate satisfaction and that the process provided them with a structure to approach problems in a constructive, timely manner. For example, one teacher commented that using peer collaboration

> "forces you to take a lot of things into consideration that you would normally not take into consideration. I had to sit here and visualize [the child's] day and go through, 'What is she actually doing?' There are a lot of things that I don't realize until I actually sit down and pick it apart and figure it out. . . . it opens your eyes to things that you are not quite aware of, but you have seen and witnessed. . . ."

In addition to the goal of solving problems informally, peer collaboration provides teachers with the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers on a regular basis, peers who often have extensive expertise but are not now routine actors in the problem-solving process. As a result of new understandings, teachers can better recognize their own capabilities to develop appropriate solutions.

Special education also has much to gain from supporting the implementation of processes such as peer collaboration. As general classroom teachers are better able to develop potentially effective solutions in a systematic way, they may be less inclined to depend so readily upon the special education system. In this way, special educators are freed to work with students whose handicapping conditions in fact require the highly specialized skills they alone can offer.

Peer collaboration provides a unique opportunity to help classroom teachers help themselves. At both the preservice and inservice level, this essential professional goal has been neglected too long. Strategies that help teachers better use their own abilities not only have the potential to relieve an overly burdened special education system; more important, they have the potential to improve the educational milieu in general by helping teachers find specific ways of accommodating the diverse needs of their students.

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Appendix E

Observation Worksheet

PEER OBSERVATION WORKSHEET

1. I have a partner(s) named _____

2. We have accepted the goal of improving each other's competence in _____

3. I will observe my partner _____

4. What I want to be observed on is:

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   What my partner wants to be observed on is:

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

5. The time we will meet to give each other feedback is _____

   _____

6. The rules of constructive feedback we will follow are:

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

   e. _____

7. The reward we will give ourselves for completing the above plans is: _____

   _____

Adapted from: Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Holubec, E.J. (1988). *Cooperation in the classroom* (rev. ed). p. 7:38. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

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